



ANTONIO VIELFAURE

Stephen Chesley

DISTRIBUTION

Photo: Baltazar



Numbers. Staggeringly big numbers. One thousand titles in the catalogue, yes, but then there's the number of prints in distribution — and the total audience. 50,000 prints in Canada for non-commercial showing, six to eight thousand in each of the Toronto and Montreal offices alone, 400,000 bookings in Canada last year. That adds up to 40,000,000 in the audience. Then you add 18,000 theatrical bookings and television exposure and sales of prints. 201,000,000 total Canadian audience.

There are also 40,000 prints in distribution abroad for non-commercial showings. Add to that television, theatrical and sales exposure and you have a world-wide audience, including Canada, of 766,000,000 people.

The above figures are estimates, of course, but National Film Board Director of Distribution Tony Vielfaure says it's a pretty accurate picture of what his department is concerned with. It's his job, and his emphasis, that breaks down the unwieldy numbers into individual showings. "My background is with the community and it's the important thing to me," he says, "that is, the people we're trying to reach."

The entire structure and execution of distribution at the Board is set up along those criteria. All efforts are pointed toward a particular potential audience, whether for the film's content itself or for the nature of the audience itself.

Vielfaure is ultimately responsible for distribution here and abroad, and his staff consists of two hundred and seventy persons, mostly clerks and secretaries, but especially about seventy-five film officers. "The branch is divided into four divisions, centred at headquarters. There's the publicity/promotion division, the media research division, the commercial division, and the library services division. The heads of each, plus the assistant director of distribution and myself, meet weekly as a committee. We share decision-making.

The roles of each division are as follows. The commercial is concerned with where to sell, contracts, anything that involves money and sales. The library people worry about loaning prints and supplying Canadian posts abroad. Media research works with the above, but is also concentrating on difficult films, communication workshops, special projects with specific films like the **Corporation** series which is neither commercial nor free. And publicity/promotion handles information, press relations, advertising, public relations, and so on.

"In the field we divide the group into Canada and abroad. Stoddard, my assistant, looks after the field. I concentrate on policy and overall functioning. There are six regions in Canada, each with a head office and various other offices located in municipalities. Internationally there are seven offices. The largest is in New York. Chicago and San Francisco offices are primarily involved with travel films. We also maintain staffs in London, Paris, Tokyo, and Delhi.

"Each foreign office has one NFB representative who is sent out there for two to five years. The rest of the staff is recruited locally. The exception is New York, which has more representatives. They're involved in sales of our films to TV or theatres, sales of 16mm prints to distributors or directly to users, as well as participation in film festivals and film weeks. They work closely with the Canadian embassy or high commission people to promote the use of our films."

Back in Canada there is another major activity: feature distribution in theatres, not to mention shorts. For this job the Board, although it participates actively in the publicity end, prefers to hire outside distributors. "We use several distributors, going by who does the best job for our films. The shorts go out mainly via Columbia Pictures. We've had a long association with them and they've given us very good distribution. They don't have exclusivity but because they are willing to do it and they do it well, they have a majority of the shorts.

"For features we use several distributors. France Film, Farouq Film, Cinépix, Columbia, Gendon (Astral purchased them recently), Keg. It's a strictly commercial arrangement whereby for an advance on the royalty we give them rights for a period of time.

"For television we deal directly with the CBC or individual stations. During the past year we've had twenty-four prime time hours and fifteen others on the English network, and nine prime and forty-three others on the French network.

"It's not a market where there's a lot of money." Recently the Board was associated with box office grosses in the media such as never before. The reason was the feature **Cry of the Wild**, Bill Mason's nature film picked up by a hotshot American four-wall company and registering ticket takes in the millions. Much criticism was leveled at the NFB for not rewarding Mason properly, for not insuring that Keg Productions got the best deal, and for lining its own pocket with untold riches.

Vielfaure puts the situation into perspective. "Hundreds of theatres were used, and everywhere everyone hears cash registers jingling and thinks the Board is rolling in money. Not

so. This type of distribution is very special, the four-wall (the distributor rents the theatre for a set fee and gets all the box office; if he wins, he wins big, because most grosses are shared on a percentage system. If he loses, the theatre wins, because they still get their costs and a profit. — S.C.) It necessitates expensive promotion, market studies, renting the theatres. To get four million dollars you may invest three.

"We figure we'll get back, by next April, about \$300,000. There's no doubt that we'll be getting back the film's cost. But it's dangerous to become dependent on income because that could determine the kinds of films we make. We could have a lot of unsatisfied Canadians. What impresses me more is that a hell of a lot of people are going to see the film."

Such is the case with all of the NFB catalogue. "In Canada demand for the films far exceeds our capacity to answer requests. We could probably double the number of prints, staff and space and not fill the requests that come, especially when it's a free service."

More money isn't really the answer, especially when other factors are considered, such as life of the print physically, and who to use as distribution points, as well as new ideas to increase the audience.

"We tried a rental system for about two months four years ago. It didn't work. I have a budget to buy my prints from the library, and I knew we didn't have enough money. So we gathered as many Canadian library boards as possible for a meeting in Montreal.

"The old service of giving a library a hundred prints and saying do what you can is no good — after three or four years prints are no good because the library has no film professional or equipment to maintain them. So we said that if the library has a professional and the equipment, we'll sell a print at cost of celluloid, about fifty per cent of the regular cost. It's been working very well. We've managed to place more prints in distribution this way.

"Other ways of increasing the audience are tried all the time. We help with promotional material, workshops. Ian McCutcheon in Ontario set up a children's program in animation technique. We bring librarians to the Board's head office for workshops and tours. We keep the catalogue up to date with a committee that goes over titles and every year withdraws some films because they are out-dated through content or references in the script.

"There is another vehicle just opening up: cable TV. We had one showing where we used two channels, one of which ran the program and the other had a phone-in with the filmmaker and an expert on the film's topic. Our policy with cable is that the films must be used for inter-action, not just to fill time. Distribution of our films on tapes is also close to reality. We have agreements with Alberta, Saskatchewan, and B.C. and we are negotiating with Ontario's OECA to allow them to reproduce and distribute our films on tape. A large percentage of the material shown in Canadian schools is from abroad. With tape and film we can encourage more from Canada."

The goal is expansion, but not only of NFB work. A plan is in the works to acquire non-NFB material to place in foreign film programs along with Board films. But Vielfaure cautions filmmakers not to rush the Board's offices offering their latest epics. "It's still very much in the planning stage and we only have a small budget. But we do hope that this year we can start acquiring non-NFB films to complement whatever we don't have ourselves. We have a working arrangement with the information division of external affairs. We'll start screening during the next few months, and we'll look mainly at shorts because the programs are placed in libraries or booked out to clubs and organisations. They're used by embassy personnel when they go out to talk about Canada.

"We haven't worked out the selection process yet but we've got a working committee which consists of two people from library services and two from information and external affairs and us. There is certainly room for more films than the Film Board produces if we're going to have a good information program abroad."

After work as a labour union organiser among immigrants in Manitoba, where he used NFB films to teach them about Canada, Vielfaure joined the Film Board as a salesman in French areas of Manitoba, in 1959. Gradually he's worked up to distribution director, a job he's held for the past two and a half years. But he still, amongst all these statistics and vast spaces, remembers his audience and returns to them in every idea or program he discusses. He wants to reach people out there, and in summing up his estimate of progress in this area, he simply says, "There's room for improvement of course, but with the resources we have I'm proud to say we're reaching that many people."



Scene from "Images de Chine"